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ON PAGE 1 Sec M

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A modern-day muckraker reviews 50 years of exposes

Reviewed by
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On the surface, it would seem as if the present generation of investigative reporters has something in common with those of the century's turn — the muckrakers, of whom Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair and Ray Stannard Baker were the most famous.

But with the exception of a few — Seymour Hersh and Howard Kohn come to mind, though there are others — today's reporters give the appearance of simply fulfilling assignments, getting the facts. The effect imparted by their lives and work is one of calculation rather than crusade. One could hardly say that about Steffens, who was called the Columbus of muckrakers and whose book *The Shame of the Cities* exposed shocking realities of governmental corruption. Or of Ida Tarbell, whose research on John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil won her many enemies. Yesterday's muckrakers were the champions of the downtrodden, and today we have no better possessor of their mantle than a New Jersey journalist, Fred J. Cook, who celebrates, with *Maverick*, a half-century in the reporting business.

"Fred Cook was not discreet," writes Studs Terkel in his introduction. "He was naive enough and stubborn enough and skilled enough to come up with some of the most important stories of our epoch."

Born in the seaside resort town of Point Pleasant, N.J., in 1911, Cook attended Rutgers and got his first job as a reporter on the Asbury Park Evening News. He covered the shipwrecks of the Morro Castle and Mohawk and witnessed the burning of the dirigible Hindenburg, which closed the era of the great airships.

His persistence in trying to keep an Ocean County mob murder case open angered local officials who appeared to have been paid off. One of Cook's older colleagues told him to "play along and stop making enemies when it isn't necessary," but Cook learned that independence had its advantages in future years.

What's more, as he watched seemingly clear-cut cases being decided in favor of the defendants — it was during Prohibition, and there was a lot of money to be made when authorities looked the other way — Cook saw in that rural New Jersey county "the skeleton of the system exposed." Understanding how the system worked, when the cub reporter matured and graduated to larger issues, he recognized the similarities in how justice was distorted.

Cook took over the editorship of a small weekly paper, the New Jersey Courier, in 1936, moved on to the Asbury Park Press 18 months later, and went to the New York World-Telegram during World War II. It was there, in the early '50s, that he made a name for himself covering the Jersey rackets beat, by breaking the story about mob kingpin Joe Adonis, whose influence reached from his home in Bergen County to cover the whole state.

Another story exposed how some New York labor officials had organized employee kickback schemes at the major downstate race tracks. But these and other investigative pieces, as explosive as they were, often turned soft during their editing. Cook perceived that politicians and those with wealth had inordinate influence with the newspaper's conservative publisher. When the liberal weekly magazine The Nation asked him to become a contributor, Cook began what would become a 25-year relationship.

It was "a kind of catharsis for me," he recalls. "When I became frustrated at having a perfectly good story killed at the paper, I found an outlet by telling it the way it should have been told in The Nation."

Of course, by writing free-lance pieces for The Nation and another magazine, Saga, Fred Cook's days on the World-Telegram were numbered. Having its star reporter's name appearing in the left-leaning Nation ground on the newspaper's ultraconservative management. The breaking point came in 1959 when Cook and his reporting partner told a TV interviewer that a city official had offered a bribe if they would stop investigating his cronies. Hauled before a grand jury, Cook's intimidated partner recanted. Both were fired. Perhaps Fred Cook had the last laugh. The World-Telegram no longer exists. And Cook adapted to the free-lancer's life with vigor.

Over the years Cook never desisted in "stirring things up." One article helped deflate the falsely heroic image of a key FBI informant, the "counterspy" Boris Morros. Others re-examined the facts of two major espionage cases of the early '50s — those of New Dealers William Remington and Alger Hiss. Cook found ample evidence of persecution.

Both defendants had been accused of espionage in that witch-hunting era by witnesses with questionable credentials and characters; both had been cleared of the charges but later convicted of perjury by blatantly partial courts. Both, according to Cook's trenchant analyses, had been the subject of dirty tricks and repression of witnesses by the FBI. His articles, and a 1958 book, *The Unfinished Story of Alger Hiss*, remain persuasive to this day although the reputations of both defendants remain under a cloud. The basic facts, and Cook's arguments, are skillfully presented in the present memoir.

Such unfashionably critical views about the FBI could hardly have escaped J. Edgar Hoover's attention — nor could Cook's series of articles over the years on FBI excesses: the bureau's incorrect boasts of a 97 percent conviction record, its virtual denial that organized crime even existed, its shabby civil-rights record, its stockpiling of personal data to keep congressmen (and reporters) in line. By the time his 1964 book, *The FBI Nobody Knows*, appeared, Cook's mail was being regularly intercepted and opened, and neighbors and friends were being visited by agents.

Cook's articles on the CIA's maneuvers in Laos, Burma, Iran, Guatemala, and the Bay of Pigs and U-2 spy plane disasters, and on the awesome power of military-related industries over American daily life, all appeared years before these matters filtered into full public awareness. And at the same time that Cook jousted with behemoth government institutions, he found time to write about

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2,

individuals caught up in Kafkaesque predicaments that destroyed their lives and landed them in prison.

In 1974, Cook's wife of 38 years died needlessly from a prescribed dose of Coumadin, a blood thinner. Rather than sue a doctor and hospital for malpractice, the author wrote a moving book titled *Julia's Story: The Tragedy of an Unnecessary Death*, which, Cook recalls here, brought in a pile of letters from people with similar stories.

For the last several years, Cook has focused his ire upon the big oil companies, which he says began a campaign in 1978 to drive gasoline and heating oil prices through the roof. His series of Nation articles, his book *The Great Energy Scam* (1983) and his brief summary in *Maverick* offer what seems to be proof that the "great Iranian oil crisis" that resulted in obscene profits for the oil industry and a steep decline for the nation's economy, was simply fraudulent. Even last winter's 20-cent jump in heating oil, occurring as it did during a worldwide oil glut, is touched on here. "If the federal government ever acts to curb the greed of the all-powerful oil combine," Cook says, "I will be the most amazed man in the world."

Would that we had more champions for the underdog in the mold of Fred J. Cook. May his witty and forthright memoirs bring further confusion to his enemies and more courage to us all.

David Haward Bain's most recent book is "Sitting in Darkness: Americans in the Philippines" (Houghton Mifflin).

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